

# AN INTERVIEW WITH JULIA LESAGE

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In an era that encourages specialization, Julia Lesage has managed to avoid such a limited attitude in her work. Perhaps best known as coeditor of the contemporary film and video quarterly *Jump Cut*, Lesage also writes, teaches, and makes her own films and videotapes.

Lesage began making films in 1967, while teaching at the Catholic University in Lima, Peru. Three years later, she returned to the United States and entered graduate school at Indiana University. There, she continued to study film theory and production and between 1970 and 1973 she started the Bloomington Feminist Filmmaking Collective, a group dedicated to teaching filmmaking to women. In 1976 her graduate work culminated in a dissertation entitled "The Films of Jean Luc Godard and Their Use in Brechtian Dramatic Theory."

In 1974, Lesage, along with Chuck Kleinhans and John Hess, founded *Jump Cut*. From its beginning, *Jump Cut* has provided a forum for feminist, gay/lesbian, and third-world issues as manifest in both dominant and subcultural media. Lesage has also continued to teach film and women's studies at several universities, colleges, and workshops in the United States, Canada, and Nicaragua. In 1981 she taught super 8 filmmaking at a workers' filmmaking workshop in Managua, where she also began the preliminary work on her own videotape *Las Nicas*.

In the following conversation, Lesage develops some of her ideas during a discussion about the current state of cultural media production in the U.S. and Central America. The interview took place in Rochester, New York, on May 2, 1985, while Julia Lesage was a visiting instructor in the film and women's studies departments at the University of Rochester.

**Lorraine Kenny:** How did *Jump Cut* get started?

**Julia Lesage:** In the early 1970s, Chuck Kleinhans, John Hess, and I were all in the comparative literature department at Indiana University. I had done some work for an underground paper and had an interest in film. Chuck, who had a background in theater and photography, was also working for the underground paper. John was teaching film studies at the time. When Chuck and I moved to Chicago, we began to think about starting a left film periodical, using the tabloid format of the underground paper because the tabloid is the bargain basement of printing and because we knew how to do layout with reduced typescript and presstype. So we had all the

skills for putting a paper together, and we could teach other people who didn't have any experience.

When we founded *Jump Cut* in 1974, film studies was just beginning as a discipline and we knew what that meant. We had come from an interdisciplinary program where, in addition to studying the literature of various countries, we came to understand how academic disciplines themselves rise and fall and intermingle. Because film studies was just emerging as a discipline, we thought that a journal with a left feminist perspective could have an impact.

In the beginning I had a full-time teaching job, so Chuck and John handled most of the editorial responsibilities. We were pretty poor then; Chuck typed the first three issues himself. However, we've continued to do all of the production ourselves. Doing layout does not appeal to any of us, but we haven't gone after grants. We fund *Jump Cut* ourselves; Chuck and I together put in \$1,000 each printing and John does the same. Subscriptions and sales cover most of the printing and mailing costs. The money for phone bills, heating, and office space comes out of our living expenses. It takes so much time to do what we do on *Jump Cut* that we do not have the time to write grant proposals. Also, we all come from a German background and have a very puritanical attitude toward money—you only spend what you have. Our view is that when people get grants they live high on the grant money. If the grant ceases to fund them they don't know what to do. On the other hand, if you are accustomed to working on a very small budget you can go on for a long time.

**LK:** Are your writers paid?

**JL:** No, initially we only paid the typist. Later we started to pay someone to come into the Berkeley office once a week to do mailings and correspondence, handle the bookstore accounts, and keep the subscription list up to date. Those are still the only people who get paid, as does the printer, of course.

**LK:** Has your editorial policy changed over the past 11 years?

**JL:** Initially, we placed a great deal of emphasis on Hollywood, and many of our readers still read mainly the Hollywood reviews. But now those reviews attract our readers much more than us. What I would call a standard *Jump Cut* Hollywood review has this format: there was this Hollywood film, it appealed to a lot of people, I can understand that they liked it, but it has a nefarious ideology underneath the surface. When people get pissed off at a movie, they seem to

think of writing an article for *Jump Cut*. I'm not saying that that malevolent ideology doesn't lie under the surface, but in our culture it also lies under the surface of all heterosexual, romantic negotiations. It lies under the surface of marriage, housework, and everything else we do. Even when I know full well what the nefarious implications of the ideology are, I go on living. I'd like to print some reviews that go beyond simply identifying this ideology.

Since the beginning of *Jump Cut* we have also pushed gay and lesbian issues. For our lesbian special section [March 1981], the women staff members in Chicago wrote an introduction in which they suggested that lesbian criticism is the hole in the heart of feminist criticism. But basically feminist film criticism hasn't been able to embrace a lesbian perspective or acknowledge what implications it might have for film criticism in general. In a recent issue of *Jump Cut* [March 1985] we tried to open the discussion of pornography to include an analysis of gay male pornography. I suspect that a number of our left and third-world readers think *Jump Cut* has a bizarre quirk of pushing gay issues. But it's important for all of us to keep our thinking intellectually and politically open. It's very enriching for anybody in left or feminist criticism to really look seriously at gay criticism.

LK: In what way?

JL: Well, Martha Fleming discussed that in a review of Vito Russo's *The Celluloid Closet* which she wrote for *Jump Cut*. She said that gay-lesbian representation in mainstream cinema probably offers the best example we have of an image production that is purely ideological. For example, lesbian imagery in pornography is a purely ideological image. It has absolutely no relation to the existence of real lesbians. Instead, it represents men's fantasies about lesbians, which men use to turn themselves on. This "taken for grantedness" of heterosexuality is extremely important to study as an ideological phenomenon, but it also becomes the point at which a lot of left criticism stops.

LK: When you speak of left criticism are you referring specifically to work done in the United States?

JL: No. I think there are all different strains of left criticism and theory. For example, most European theory, like that of Roland Barthes, uses the terms *masculine* and *feminine*. But the very use of these words presupposes their validity. Many people following a Lacanian strain of thought would also use the terms uncritically, as if they were transparent when, in fact, *feminine* is only a corollary to *masculine*. As a term *feminine* signifies powerlessness in relation to a term of power; it is not a term about women. Yet using the terms *masculine* and *feminine* often betrays the heterosexist assumption that underlies a lot of criticism.

LK: But how is that assumption different in a homosexual perspective?

JL: In gay male cinema the roles of passive and active, penetrator and the person being penetrated, are interchangeable.

LK: Aren't the terms *masculine* and *feminine* used to describe specific roles in gay culture?

JL: I'm not sure. I think they can be used in the form of theater, but I don't think they are used in as much of an essentialist way.

LK: Do you think it is possible to use *masculine* and *feminine* to signify anything?

JL: No. We shouldn't use the term *feminine*; we should just reject it as corrupt.

LK: And what about *masculine*? Would you also reject it?

JL: No, I think *masculine* is an ideological term that lets men describe themselves! Women saw through that one a long time ago. I think *feminine* also tells you something about men, but I don't think it's as obvious. You can use the term *female*

as you can use the term *woman*, but *feminine* should be challenged, or always put in quotation marks.

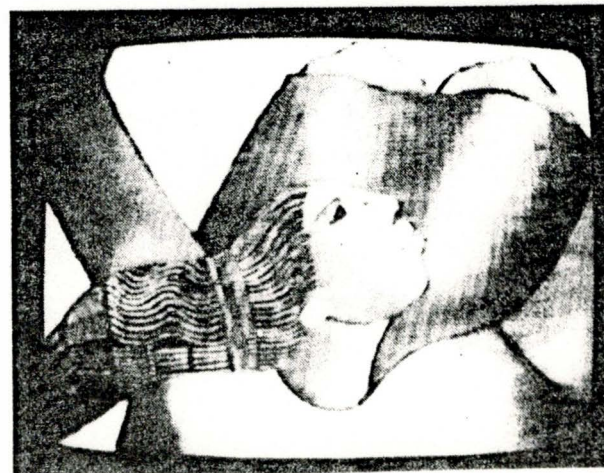
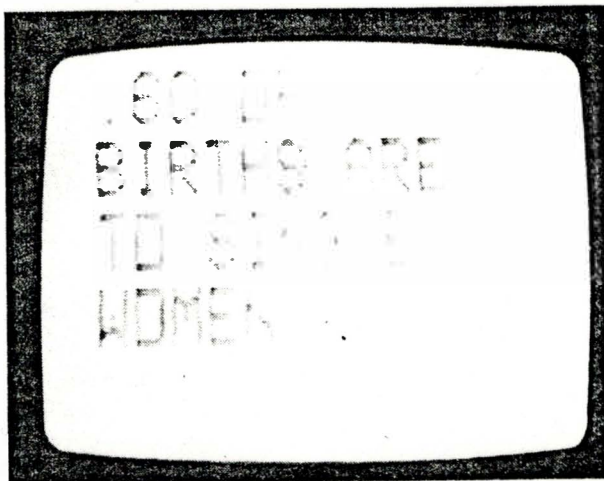
LK: Like the word *natural*?

JL: Yes, like the word *natural*. When we recognize that *feminine* is construed as *natural* in our culture and language, then I think that we can begin to see the relationship between feminist criticism and general ideological criticism.

LK: Could you talk about feminist criticism, feminist filmmaking, and feminist aesthetics. You've written several articles on various aspects of feminism and film.

JL: The course I teach and have taught for a while is the ideology of the domestic's sphere in film and television. The domestic's sphere can be located in the household, family life, sexuality, or things of that sort. I am interested in the ways in which the domestic's sphere is articulated in film and video because these media often take up the theme of psychological labor and find visual and audio correlates to represent that labor. In my own social experience I have noticed that egotizing, observing others' emotional states, is one of the major social and emotional tasks that women perform cross-culturally. Sometimes this function has to do with lore passed on from women to women, with women being the caretakers of memory. In many households the women keep track of who is related to whom and who did what in terms of ancestors. It is at this level that some German women filmmakers have observed the relation between domestic history and public history. For example, Jutta Brückner's *Hungerjahre* (1979) presents the history of post-WWII Germany through the observation of a teenaged woman's domestic life and an exploration of her self-image. This strand of feminist filmmaking fascinates me.

Frames from *Las Nicas* (1984), by Julia Lesage and Carole Isaacs.





Many women's films use the device of talking heads to help structure their stories. In my article, "Feminist Documentary: Aesthetics and Politics," [*Show Us Life: Toward a History and Aesthetic of the Committed Documentary*, ed. Thomas Waugh (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1984)] I wrote about this phenomenon. Since the women's movement began, women have been interested in the power of voice and the power of naming. Talking heads literally call attention to and isolate that power. But the heads also represent another problem in our society: the visual culture around us has so manipulated female sexuality that it's very difficult for women to film or tape the whole body. At the women's film and video festivals I've gone to this year and last, I've noticed that there have been a lot of films and tapes made about women in sports. I think that sports offer an intermediary zone for women media makers where the subjects can take control of public space and the media makers can freely present female bodies. Not being athletic myself I'm not so much interested in sports as in mainstream films that depict physically active women. I liked *Charlie's Angels*, I loved *Flash Dance*, and the archetypal film of my childhood was *National Velvet*. All these films showed active female bodies. That's why *Personal Best* appealed to a lot of women. It probably conveyed more physical pleasure by presenting athletes than by its love-making sequences.

LK: How can a filmmaker make women's bodies the subject rather than the object of the camera? A film like *Flash Dance* certainly doesn't achieve that.

JL: No. I don't think that the woman's body was the subject. . . . No, I certainly wouldn't attribute that to *Flash Dance*. On the level of kinesis and activity, however, it was appealing. Granted, some of the images of sexuality were a little strange, like the sequence that shows a woman trapped in a corner watching her television under strobe lights. That's an image of housewife paranoia or something of that sort. But at the same time there was just enough bizarre stuff going on in the imagery to keep me interested.

One film that I think tries to deal with this issue of filming women's bodies is Trinh T. Minh-Ha's *Re-assemblage*. Filmed in Angola, *Re-assemblage* denounces on its sound track the attempts of the ethnographic filmmaker to present transparent images of the culture. At the same time the film visually presents some of the most libidinally satisfying pre-oedipal images that one could possibly imagine. For example, with camera angles at the height of a two- or three-year-old child's eye, *Re-assemblage* shows a baby suckling at its mother's breast as milk drips from the nipple. It's interesting to me that there is a way in which the cinematic depiction of sexuality is presumed to be, by conventional standards, the depiction of sexual intercourse. I've found almost every sex-

ual intercourse sequence I've seen in either men's or women's cinema really unsatisfying. Maybe we should require filmmakers to think of other ways to represent sexuality. Laura Mulvey wanted to put a moratorium on filming women's bodies. We could have a five-year moratorium and not allow any men to film or tape women's bodies for that time period. LK: But again how do *women*, as opposed to men, film women's bodies so that they are not objectified?

JL: Well, maybe after five years in which we haven't had any male representations of women's bodies, women media makers will find the means to represent themselves in their own terms. It's worth a try.

I also think that in order for women truly to represent their own sexuality in film they must first vent some of their pent-up anger and rage. Related to sexual expression is the expression of hostility. We understand that male sexuality is filled with hostility against women. It doesn't take much to look around and see that. The number of dead female bodies in narratives alone would prove it. We have to recognize that we have generations of women's hostility against men as a social group, and it needs to be expressed. And on the more intimate level of sexual relations we have another degree of hostility that needs to be expressed symbolically in art. Cecelia Condit's videotapes, *Possibly in Michigan* and *Beneath the Skin*, begin to accomplish this. Both tapes depict a tremendous amount of hostility. In *Possibly in Michigan*, Condit provides an immense amount of satisfaction when the women cook the rapist for dinner. It's not that I can get into slasher films or graphic, naturalistic depictions of violence against men, but when I see this symbolic representation of women cooking the rapist, eating him, and throwing his bones out the window I find that extremely gratifying. It doesn't turn me on sexually but I suspect that I may need that release of anger before I can find imagery that is sexually satisfying. In other words, peace and love imagery may not turn anybody on.

However, I think it is important that women film- and videomakers find ways of expressing that rage so that the imagery is obviously symbolic. In *Possibly in Michigan* no one thinks that these are real women chopping up a real man for dinner. Naturalistic depictions of this kind tend not to be tolerated socially. Many years ago in a film program in Chicago a woman student was making a talking head documentary about a woman who had taken out a contract to kill a man who had raped her twice and was going to come back and rape her again. But that footage was confiscated by the school and no one has heard of it since. That would have made a really powerful film, but it would have been a difficult one for people to watch because it fell into the category of documentary.

In Nicaragua women have a more direct outlet for their rage. Many of the women are trained in the military, and many have rifles assigned to them which they keep in their homes. This training gives them a social permission to kill. They don't use that training all the time but they know that they have a socially organized structure of emotional, ideological, and moral permission. That kind of experience changes a woman's attitude toward rape because obviously she's not going to be raped again if she can help it. Unfortunately, even when women empower themselves in this way they cannot always defend themselves against male aggression. I knew a woman in Nicaragua who fought against the Contras as a militia woman for 14 hours to save herself and her farm, but the farm fell to the Contras and she was raped by a lot of them and thrown down into a pit and shot. In a culture where men have more power than women, the fact that women take on the task of self- and social defense of the community may actually elicit more male violence against them sexually.

LK: So where does that leave us?

JL: In our own culture we do not have the same situation. In



our culture I would opt for the *symbolic* depiction of women's rage, in which we would all know that it is an emotional appeal and not a call to action.

**LK:** Then what is the call to action?

**JL:** Well, that is a social issue. My goal is to live in a culture where rape is not a thinkable category. I find it intolerable that rape is a mental category that men can imagine and act on, and that women can imagine and fear. Poisoning isn't an ordinary social category in people's lives. I want rape to occupy as little of our minds as poisoning does. What we have to do to get there is not quite as easy to determine.

**LK:** I wonder though if symbolic representation is really that satisfying. I saw *Possibly in Michigan* with a group of women and many of us were outraged by it.

**JL:** Oh, I believe that it is outrageous. I wouldn't want to have a steady diet of anger, but what does repressed anger do to us? The result of repressed anger in women's lives is all the psychosomatic illness, the incidences of depression, and the "masochistic" impulses that women have. We all know how huge a category that is. We can have portraits of noble revenge—Medea, the revenge of kings, queens, and princesses—if that's needed to satisfy the viewer's superego. I think that's an interesting idea for the direction of art in Europe, Japan, and the United States because we don't have the same kind of social organization in which the needs of the revolution are much clearer. But I personally can get off on women's tacky revenge. Unfortunately, however, our media have incredible cooling out mechanisms to deal with anger.

**LK:** Such as?

**JL:** For example, there's always a little snippet on the news about a demonstration. That's the space that's allotted for anger. Gayatri Spivak discusses a parallel to this phenomenon in her work on the colonial subject. She suggests that the colonial subject becomes defined for us not only by such characterizations as the "mammy" or the Filipino butler, for example, but also by the narrative space that is given to those characters. The mammy who has a walk-on role is a stereotypical and demeaning figure and shows that blacks don't have much power as actors and actresses in Hollywood. But of more general social significance is the fact that the narrative tells us this is as much space as black people have to occupy our minds and this is the role in which they will occupy it. They will stand in a subordinate relation to the whites. They will be as a woman to the white people, mother earth as it were; even the Filipino man-butler is the woman or boy to the whites. And these characters appear for 2 to 5 minutes out of 90 minutes of film. That proportion is the amount of time that we have to think about third-world people.

I think that expressions of social anger are given that much space in our narratives. Sometimes an expression of anger will be given more space when it is part of the dominant class's fantasy about threat. For example, the terrorist is the villainous character that's been invented for the dominant culture to express its fears to itself, and that character gets a lot of space. But that character doesn't have anything to do with radicals. It's like the lesbian in heterosexual pornography. It has to do with the dominant class's projections, very often projections of its own evil. For example, television might show a fictional film in which anti-nuclear activists are about to set off a nuclear bomb to show the world the dangers of nuclear warfare. Well, only somebody who has the power of nuclear warfare could think up such a scenario; the story line has nothing to do with anti-nuclear activities. The terrorist fear gets a lot of media space, but ordinary real anger gets very little.

That's all part of the hegemonic culture and ideology. The dominant ideology maintains itself by including representations of subcultural movements, ideologies, and discontents

in a form that is then structured in the dominant class's own terms. The representational structure itself teaches us a way to think. That's why it's very interesting to me to think about women's colonized minds. How can we be oppressed for all these years and not be angry? Just to identify and express that anger will long remain a big task for women film- and videomakers.

**LK:** I was wondering if you would talk about your teaching experiences, and how they may relate to some of what you've been discussing.

**JL:** Well, I've always liked teaching. I started out in pre-med and then became a high school English teacher. My father was a doctor and my mother was an English teacher, so I went from the paternal to the maternal, partly because I liked to read and I was the world's louisiest scientist you could ever imagine! One of the teachers I loved the most as an undergraduate said that the goal of the teacher is quickly to get through the time of inequality so you and your students can work together as equals. Now that doesn't always happen, but it's still interesting for me to think about how people learn.

The form of teaching that I think is the least effective, and I occasionally do it, is lecturing. I came to that conclusion early on when I asked myself how much I actually remembered from the lectures I had had in college. I learned the most when I was required to write about something. Since I taught high school for a long time, I'm not very optimistic. I think out of every batch of term papers that you assign at least 10% to 15% are written by somebody else. So that's not my favorite form of teaching either, but I don't feel particularly punitive about it. It seems to me that if society is going to reward the student who has a degree with an immensely better economic future, then that student has the right to buy his or her way through to get that degree. But I don't want it happening in my class! Since I've come to the conclusion that basically learning means what students learn for themselves, this presents a challenge to me as a teacher. Often I present a book of readings made up of articles that I like and I say to the students, "Look, these are my own research materials. This is the stuff that is shaping me intellectually and I'm offering it to you." Sometimes if the reading load is heavy, I'll have them keep a journal of their responses to the readings. I'll have them put that source material together in different ways for themselves. That's the most rewarding thing for me.

I also like to critique people's artistic productions. I think that people in the art community need to develop forms of teaching each other. When I look at someone's production I try to understand where they are at and imagine what steps they could take to move some place else. I have to mentally go over a process of artistic creation and intellectual mastery of a certain body of material. This forces me to develop another intellectual view of material that I already know. When I do this with material I want to write about, and I do it a couple of times, I really see some of the glue that puts my argument together. It is both clarifying and rewarding.

Unfortunately I think that the political harassment I have suffered in my teaching career has robbed me of one of the things that I really love. I was fired three times in four years for political reasons, and after that I was somewhat depressed. I literally went through a mourning period in which I had to let go of the possibility of being a full-time teacher. It was as if I had lost a chunk of my life. Of course I still find artistic production, public lecturing, writing, and doing *Jump Cut* rewarding. I wouldn't say I am a person who goes around suffering. I lecture often and I teach as a visiting professor for a semester or so at different universities.

I think that men sometimes get uncomfortable in my classes because I always direct my writing and teaching at women. Men can eavesdrop and participate if they're willing to enter in



at the level of women's subcultural conversation, but I think that they'll find my words uncomfortable. Often when I say things, I see the women cringing because they then feel I am telling men one of their secrets—often about makeup, or ego-tending, or sexual relations. I say, "Listen, women, those guys won't remember." Once, during a public lecture on women's films I made it quite clear that male privilege meant that men could not receive certain information that was freely available to them. I said, "All right, I'll tell you one of women's secrets but I can guarantee that tomorrow the men in this room won't remember it." I said, "Do you know what most women think when they look at all those magazines like *Playboy* and *Husler*? Every one of those pictures shows some lady with her legs spread apart so you can see her pubic hair, and all those pictures are exactly the same. Men only buy those magazines for this one kind of picture because that's as far as they can stretch their imaginations." I said, "You know what women think when they see this? They think that male sexuality is really dumb." I got a nervous titter from the audience, so I said, "All right, I just told you one of women's secrets, and I know that tomorrow the men won't remember what I said." So I teach and lecture like that. Brecht said a good performance will divide the audience along class lines. I always intend to divide the audience along sexual political lines, and along class lines with respect to issues of imperialism. I'm perfectly willing to have some of the audience go out and say I was a fanatic or overwrought, because I know that the divisions I've made measure up to real social divisions that need to be sharpened.

**LK:** What are your perceptions of the current state of women's and film studies in universities?

**JL:** Well, women's studies students are the best to teach because they need to learn a little bit about film, but they already know a lot about ideology. They may not understand how image culture works but they understand how ideology works so teaching them about image culture is easy. I had a women's studies class look at Erving Goffman's *Gender Advertisements*. I told them they didn't have to read the first half of the book, but that they should just look at the pictures and find ads in magazines that illustrated what Goffman was talking about. They didn't need any instructions at all. They could just go ahead and do it. To get students in a film or English department to do that level of image analysis, I'd have to do a lot more teaching.

I also like teaching people who are doing film and video production because issues of sexual politics come up in especially interesting and varied ways in production. I remember critiquing a film that a man was making about prostitutes. In part of it he cruised around town in a car driven by somebody else and he filmed prostitutes on the street. The other half of the film was a fictional narrative about a woman who was a prostitute. These segments were filmed in a bedroom in close-up, traditional narrative form. The woman's

story was very intimate and based on the life of somebody the filmmaker knew. I pointed out to him that he was using the fictional prostitute as part of his imagination, which was represented by the fact that he filmed the fictional segments up close, while he had filmed the street prostitutes from a distance. He wanted to keep the reality of these women away from himself. I could talk to him about that quite easily because he had already started to work on these issues, if only unconsciously, in the process of putting together his film.

**LK:** So he responded well to your criticisms?

**JL:** Well I don't know if he changed his film or his life. Why would a man give up male privilege? That really is unfair. One of the things I've noticed in the last two years of lecturing and teaching is that from 5 to 10 young men at a public lecture and 2 to 3 men in every class have decided that intellectual life without feminism is incomplete. They understand how a feminist perspective has changed and expanded all intellectual and emotional horizons. And they're demanding such a perspective from their own intellectual experience in undergraduate and graduate work. It's fascinating because they enter into this discussion on the level at which I'm talking to the women. Oh, sometimes they're a little tone deaf and they don't hear exactly what I'm saying but at least they're willing to try.

**LK:** When did you develop an interest in Latin American culture?

**JL:** That was during the late '60s, when I taught English for three years at the Catholic University in Lima, Peru. Before that I worked at a high school in Rochester, New York, but quickly became bored with suburban life. I just wanted to get out of the country and in 1967 the job in Peru fell my way. Eventually I ended up as the assistant director of the language department. However, when I first arrived during the summer, there wasn't much to do. I signed up for a film course for Peruvian school teachers and I learned about filmmaking in Spanish. I later went back to graduate school in the United States, wrote my dissertation on Brecht and Godard, and helped set up a feminist super 8 filmmaking group called the Bloomington Feminist Filmmaking Collective.

In November 1981, I went to Nicaragua to work with the super 8 filmmaking workshop of the Sandinista labor union. That allowed me to pull together my interest in film and Latin America with my knowledge of Spanish. Most of the people in the workshop now make video, which is distributed by Xchange TV in New York City. I also work with Xchange so that the Latin American connection has come back into my life. In addition, John, Chuck, and I went back down to Nicaragua last summer [August 1984] and shot 30 hours of 1/2-inch videotape.

**LK:** What are you trying to do now with your video work?

**JL:** I'm spending a lot of time editing this more recent Nicara-

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guan material. My main aesthetic and political goal is to show that the poor people in Nicaragua have political power and that they know they have it. People in the United States have trouble recognizing such a fact partly because the dominant media, with its middle-class bias, doesn't allow us to see the poor as intellectuals, as what Gramsci called "organic intellectuals," people who may or may not have had a formal education, but who are socially aware. It's hard for many people here to think of the poor like that. On another level I think it's difficult for people in the United States, rich or poor, to think of themselves as having a large degree of control over their work place, or neighborhood, over voting, or over the military.

In Nicaragua military life depends on the militias. Everybody in the community gets together and learns to use a rifle. The mainstay of the military lies in the readiness of the population. As a middle-class North American I have felt a tremendous lack in my life because I have not had the emotional satisfaction that comes from creating one's own social world. So when I can move into a group of people who are creating their own world and are aware of it, it adds a dimension to my life that I had thought was not possible. Brecht talked about this when he said that Western dramatic literature and narratives focus on individuals as if they were the heroes of their destinies, but in fact those narratives only allow the main characters to make changes in their lives; the minor characters always remain the same. Furthermore, the main character seems to make a change because of one momentous action or decision, but the fact is that people change all the time for various reasons and under various influences, and it's not just one person's change that's important. We have in our heads this notion of "I make my life," which has been fed to us by our culture. But when you move into a world where "I make my life" is connected with "we make our lives," you have a really different emotional experience. And in Nicaragua it's even more dramatic because it's the poor people who are having this experience.

In my video work I'm using a revitalized form of cinéma vérité. If I allow the people to speak about their own lives, they provide as much political analysis as I could ever imagine, and they're also witty and self-critical. On a visual level I want to demonstrate that what is simply perceived here as poor really contains all the richness of daily life for the Nicaraguan people. So I want to recontextualize images that would otherwise be thought of as images of poverty to show that they represent "the people." A friend of mine who is an Andean anthropologist, Jeanette Sherbondy, pointed out that in Latin cultures no one ever talks about themselves as Indian. "Indian" is a Spanish construct; in their indigenous languages people only talk about themselves as "the people." Every culture has a term for itself that means *we, us, the people*. I think that in my video work I can get at aspects of the reality of

Nicaraguan life by presenting the Nicaraguans in an aesthetic way that dramatically undermines U.S. viewers' mindsets about the "others" who are there fighting the revolution. In fact these "others" have something we very much want for ourselves. And I feel free to use cinéma vérité because I don't think it will ever be transparent here. My work is obviously always a construct which I, a North American, am using in an attempt to translate Latin culture in terms relevant to people in the United States. My tapes will always be sufficiently strange, so viewers will wonder if it's really true. I know they won't understand how these Nicaraguans can be so articulate and so poor at the same time. This social phenomenon is very strange to people in the United States no matter how I put it on screen—cinéma vérité or otherwise.

LK: *Las Nicas* isn't cinéma vérité. Is there a reason you used a still-image montage in this tape? [*Las Nicas* (1984) is a videotape based on Lesage and Carole Isaacs's slide show, *Revolutionary Mothers* (1982). After interviewing many Nicaraguan women about their political, social, sexual, and familial lives, Lesage and Isaacs compiled the text for the sound track. Through the voices of actresses *Las Nicas* retells the women's stories. Visually *Las Nicas* consists of still images of the Nicaraguan landscape and people, including shots of political street murals and individual women. Several images are repeated throughout the tape. Written texts periodically appear on the screen. They help organize, interpret, and reiterate what is being spoken on the sound track.] JL: The still images were used partly out of material necessity and partly because it's a Brechtian style that I enjoy. I don't think Brecht's theater was dry. I think it was very emotional. It was paced in a way that forced the audience to stop and reflect.

LK: Why did you repeat images throughout the piece?

JL: The repetition of images is also a way of making the viewer more aware of the artifice of the image production. The viewer is continually reminded that these are images. It's also a little twit at the consummability of image culture. People always want to have something new to consume. They don't want to eat the same kind of food twice. Also, slide-video productions devour images. You can hold a slide on a screen for 10 to 12 seconds and people will enjoy it, but you can only hold a still image on a video screen for 5 seconds at most. In *Las Nicas* those images are held for 3 to 5 seconds, so I have no aesthetic qualms about reusing some of the images. I know that it bothers people, but I wanted to make people aware of the production of this image material as an act of cultural translation.

Thematically and emotionally I'm working very close to the lives of the people that I met in Nicaragua. I think Latin audiences are much more expectant and appreciative of the emotional quality of the material I'm presenting. Emotionality is very important in Latin culture so in the Spanish language version of *Las Nicas* I feel free to work in what would be called either an operatic vein or, if I wanted to be pejorative, a heavy-handed emotional way. In Latin America, if you do not communicate with people on a direct emotional level, you can't even conduct business. But I'm also aware that for an Anglo audience this is not an accepted form of cultural communica-



tion. So I work first in Spanish, and then I work on translations. The two versions of *Las Nicas* are aesthetically slightly different.

In Managua in 1984 I showed *Las Nicas* to a group of Nicaraguan women doing research for the agrarian reform ministry and they were fascinated by it. They thought it raised issues that they never talked about, especially around sexuality. I asked them if they thought that these issues should be talked about and they agreed strongly. One woman was going to start doing research on farm women she thought were lesbians. No one, as far as I know, in cultural anthropology in South America has ever done any work on lesbian farm women.

LK: I had the most problems with your tape, *Home Life*. [*Home Life* (1984) is a cinéma vérité video taped in Esteli, Nicaragua, by Lesage and Kleinhans in collaboration with the Seattle-based minister Randall Mullins. Mullins, who had been living with the Diaz family introduces them to the viewer. The camera follows them around their house and yard while Mullins asks them questions about their lives. They answer him in Spanish. Their stories are translated into English by Lesage who remains off camera.] The camera continually looked down on the Nicaraguan family portrayed in that piece. I felt that there was some big North American male behind that camera filming those people from a literal as well as figurative distance. To make matters worse, there is this dogood, liberal American minister who didn't even speak the family's language, and yet he called them his friends. I wondered why you were working on this project. It seemed very different from your other work and didn't seem to follow your usual political and aesthetic approach.

JL: I have no defense for the camera angle. It will be interesting when Chuck hears about this because he did the shooting. It's a difficult issue because most North Americans are taller than most Nicaraguans.

We chose Randall as a subject because we thought he would be a good bridge to a North American audience. Randall struck Chuck and me as an American type who is known and loved in this culture. He's the lanky backwoodsman, a Mark Twain figure, who's come up from the last century, the person who speaks from the heart. It's also clear that the family doesn't mind that he doesn't speak Spanish very well. It's not an issue for them; they're extending themselves to him in love anyway. He had lived with them for about five weeks at the time we shot the tape.

I think Randall works as a bridge to about half of our white North American audience. Latinos respond to the family; Randall is incidental to them. But the other half of the white audience has the same reaction that you do. It's one of those

things that never ceases to amaze me. I actually find your response intellectually expanding. It makes me aware of the fact that I always have assumptions that I didn't know were assumptions at the time I was working on a creative project.

One of the things I understand from doing this kind of media work is that a lot of people don't respond to or don't like the kind of media that Xchange TV distributes, but I'm very committed to video made inside El Salvador and Nicaragua by Salvadorans and Nicaraguans. That video work speaks to me; it's textured. I like its politics and I like the wit of the people. But it doesn't speak to many viewers as effectively as some El Salvador or Nicaraguan media based on a tight compare-and-contrast model. For viewers to get into the rhythms of revolutionary Latin culture they have to give up a mindset, a mental framework, a media experience that they are used to. And that's something that people don't necessarily want to do. They usually want the bridge to their own experience to be made really clear, so that's why the Randall figure is there. I'm working with all forms of translation, but I sense that the work I do is, for many people, too Latin. It doesn't have enough of that Randall-type figure.

Your critique is one I expect from a more sophisticated film and video audience, but I think in terms of solidarity work, media makers encounter a constant demand for material to be presented in, what I find, a nauseatingly predigested form. How do you get people to want to make that leap? If people wanted to make that leap there wouldn't be racism in the United States. Racism keeps people from wanting to make the mental leap to another culture. Just as patriarchy keeps the dominant culture from understanding women's subculture. Those two forms of thought depend on exactly the same mechanism.

**LK:** It surprises me that people in solidarity work wouldn't be more responsive to a piece that was from a Central American perspective rather than a North American one.

**JL:** They say it doesn't communicate to the people they want to communicate to. I'm trying just about every narrative form I can think of, and it's not clear to me that any of them work better than any others.

The other important issue is distribution. I knew that I wanted to start making video after I realized that every little hamlet in the United States has a video rental store. It was clear to me that the means of communication were changing faster than film-studies people were willing to admit. Most of those stores were making a profit from renting pornography. Basically the libido put the videocassette recorder in people's homes. But now because of that there is a whole distribution apparatus in place, and the radical media people are going to have to learn how to use it and build it into a radical art form. I find it interesting that *Channels* in its year-end round-up this year said that the 1/2-inch videocassette was going to do what

cable had promised to do but obviously never would, which is narrowcasting—delivering a specific message to a target audience and not worrying about reaching everybody. Cable won't do it because of things like the Atlanta Super Station; they can't make money from narrowcasted programming.

So I knew that I wanted to build 1/2-inch video into a radical art form, but I also knew that I wouldn't have any emotion invested in it if I weren't doing it myself. Now I've got my own VHS equipment and I'm making my own tapes, so I have to figure out ways of distributing them. After I edited the English version of *Las Nicas* and *Home Life* I had 110 1/2-inch copies made. Eighty percent of those copies are VHS and the remaining 20% are Betamax; I'll have a higher percentage of Betamax made when I do the Spanish version because South American 1/2-inch video distribution is largely in Betamax. The copies were made at a rate of \$4.00 per hour at Western Film and Video in Los Angeles. I paid about \$6.00 for each blank tape, and 90¢ for the plastic boxes I used to package them. Each tape cost me about \$13.00. I paid for that up front and then I started peddling the tapes to friends and sending out flyers. I'd like to get together with other Latin American media people to send out a joint mailing to teachers in Latin American studies programs and to other target audiences. My model for this came from Tami Gold and Lyn Goldfarb's method of distributing their tape *From Bedside to Bargaining Table*. They made this tape specifically for nurses, so they did a mailing to teachers in nursing schools and they've had a good response. I think that putting out \$1300 and getting back 100 tapes is a small investment, because then you have this material which you can circulate any way you want. This radical video network is undoubtedly going to grow.

I also feel that anybody who has work shown on public television should be willing to have viewers videotaping their programs and using those tapes in their own solidarity work. I don't care if people copy my work, but when you copy 1/2-inch to 1/2-inch you get a real electronic degradation. Whereas if you tape material off of public television you get a good signal and a good tape. I know a lot of film people who get upset when I say this but I think it's important. Many people have access to radical media only if they copy it off T.V. I think that if radical media work is on public television, or cable, the film- and videomakers should send a note around to the solidarity and feminist groups that might be able to use the program and encourage them to copy it. It should be done in a positive way so that you're saying, "Look this is important. I want you to copy it and use it. It's out there." As a radical media form video is clearly here to stay. Thank God that the libido put all those videocassette recorders in people's homes. Maybe we can put them to good social use.